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SUBJECT: THE PAMIRS - GOING THEIR OWN WAY, WHETHER THEY
WANT TO OR NOT

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR TRACEY A. JACOBSON, 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Contacts in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) say regional disaffection from the central government is less pronounced than political leaders in Dushanbe think. The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is making GBAO an example of liberal economic development and better education, but struggles continually to get buy-in from a suspicious government most concerned with control. Legal trade with China and Afghanistan, while useful, has limited impact on the local economy. Suspicion and control-mania in Dushanbe, combined with GBAO's physical isolation, ensure it will continue to be an underdeveloped region dependent on foreign donors. End summary.

GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

[1](#)2. (SBU) Embassy officers travelled to Gorno-Badakhshan in late-September, visiting Khorog, Ishkashim, the Wakhan Corridor, and Murgab. Travel time to Khorog was slightly down from previous trips, with a 13 hour drive via Tavildara, largely thanks to the new smooth highway from Dushanbe as far as Rogun. Just after Rogun, the road over the mountains in Tavildara district is very rough, dusty and bone-jarring in an armored landcruiser. The Tavildara region is a poverty-stricken backwater. The only new structure visible along the road was the mansion of local warlord (and former opposition leader) Mirzo Ziyoev. Many soldiers passed in military and civilian cars, possibly due to the President's visit to neighboring Garm district the following week. Unusually in rural Tajikistan, virtually no one smiled or waved at embassies car. Beyond Tavildara district, considered a stronghold of opposition to President Rahmon, road conditions improved noticeably.

[1](#)3. (U) The mud-brick houses on the Afghanistan side of the river sported many satellite antennae. In Khorog, the lights of the Afghan village across the river shone at night; until this summer there was no electricity supply there. AKDN-affiliated Pamir Energy recently put an electric line across the river.

[1](#)4. (U) China trade dominated the road to Khorog, and beyond. Long lines of identical white Chinese minivans were headed toward Dushanbe, loaded with people, boxes, and goats. The vans were destined to serve as route taxis in the capital.

The only traffic going toward China were largely empty cargo trucks. The traffic seemed to make little economic impact on the region, passing through with a bit of money made on lodging drivers.

ENERGY - STILL BRIGHT

15. (SBU) Daler Juraev, Director of AKDN-affiliated Pamir Energy in Khorog, described GBAO's economic prospects, saying the only real potential for the region lay in power generation, mining, and tourism. Pamir Energy was close to covering its costs through improved collection, brought about by intense outreach and customer service. Pamir Energy's collection rate from private customers in Khorog was around 80%, but there were continuing problems with government clients. Daler was optimistic that the problems were solvable, and looked forward to expansion along the Pyanj River and up to Murgab. He was talking with a Chinese mining company that wished to build a power line 170 km from Khorog to Murgab. The recent extension of power to villages just across the river from Khorog in Afghanistan was going well, though it benefited only a few hundred people. He noted with pride that improved efficiency would enable Pamir Energy to supply Afghan customers year-round.

TOURISM - ONLY FOR THE ADVENTUROUS

16. (SBU) AKDN had long been training locals in hospitality, "to understand what foreign tourists expect", but the GBAO Governor did not take tourism seriously because the local tourism association supplied little tax revenue. "He doesn't care how many people it employs," said Juraev. Senior

government officials viewed tourism in terms of control, seeking to limit the number of visitors and their movements. The continuing existence of GBAO entry permits was one pointless administrative barrier to tourism. A few days after this conversation, a pair of American kayakers were detained at gunpoint by Tajik soldiers when they floated past a military installation in central GBAO; and held for 3 days.

The same kayakers say Tajikistan places so many administrative burdens on tourists that they cannot recommend it as a destination.

17. (SBU) Tourism throughout the region is very limited in scope. There are no hotels outside Khorog, only a few guest houses. Western tourists complained of misleading and corrupt guides, and unsanitary conditions in guest houses, but most seemed mentally prepared for the challenges. Not that there are many such visitors. According to Border guards in GBAO the number of tourists crossing from Kyrgyzstan was sharply higher than last year; from 150 in 2007 up to 500 in summer 2008. Daler Juraev believed visitor numbers were growing, but were still in the low thousands for all of Badakhshan each year.

ENDANGERED LUNCH

18. (SBU) Hunting Marco Polo sheep provides one income source for locals, with foreigners paying thousands of dollars to shoot a sheep. The business is famously corrupt. Daler Juraev said the oft-cited price of \$20,000 to shoot a Marco Polo sheep was misleading; foreigners officially paid \$5,000 per sheep, but were then misled by their guides, who set them up with difficult shots and used fake blood to convince customers they had wounded sheep that they had actually missed. The hunters then must pay thousands of dollars more to take another shot. The number of sheep are reportedly declining. The President ordered a moratorium on hunting Marco Polo sheep to take effect in early 2009, but it may not make much difference. At Shaimak, at the eastern end of the Wakhan corridor, a local invited emboffs in for lunch and explained that yes, the numbers of Marco Polo sheep was declining - not because of foreign hunters, but because "we hunt them ourselves for food." He pointed at meat emboffs were sharing; "that's Marco Polo sheep right there. Tasty? It was. INL officer had asimilar experience at Kizilart

Border Post, where the Border Guards gave him horns from the Marco Polo sheep they had just served him.

BRAIN DRAIN TO AFGHANISTAN - NO KIDDING

¶9. (SBU) The Afghan Consul in Khorog, Aziz Ahmed Barez, said the consulate issued about 200 visas per month to Tajiks, and a few to western tourists traveling to Afghan Badakhshan and Mazar-i-Sharif. But the Tajik Foreign Ministry representative in Khorog approved visas to only twenty Afghans a month. The State Security Committee Chief in Khorog told Aziz he would allow one employment visa, for a cook to work in an Afghan restaurant; he likes Afghan cooking. Aziz believed Afghans paid up to \$1,500 to bribe Tajik officers for single visa. Aziz noted a brain-drain of skilled Tajiks; about 2,000, mainly doctors, worked in Afghanistan, making several times the income they could earn at home. While his work seemed limited (he suggested the Qat home. While his work seemed limited (he suggested the embassy hire him part time for consulting services), Aziz was vague about his consulate's activities; they did "legal" and "cross border cooperation" duties with five full-time diplomats. He hoped a Chinese consulate would open soon in Khorog to facilitate regional trade. Pamiris had to go to Dushanbe for a Chinese visa, then fly to Urumqi. Chinese border authorities at Kulma Pass allowed only one-way traffic for Tajiks - out of China. Aziz frankly wished to leave Khorog.

ALL QUIET ON THE EASTERN FRONT

¶10. (SBU) A relic of USSR-PRC enmity, the border security zone is more than 20 km deep, with a stout fence running along it to keep Tajiks to the main road. On the road to Kulma pass, border guards kept the security zone closed except to authorized traffic, but a few kilometers away there were long stretches of fence missing, as locals had used the posts as winter fuel. There were also long stretches of power lines torn down near the border, perhaps sold as scrap

metal. There were many gates left open and apparently unwatched, giving easy access into the security zone. Border guards didn't know why the security zone still existed, except to say they found the Chinese aggressive in exploring GBAO territory they might wish to acquire, and it was better to keep the populations separated. But there didn't appear to be enough people present to supply a confrontation (Ref B).

BORDER GUARD ENCOUNTERS

¶11. (SBU) While trying to reach the Chinese border at Kulma Pass (unsuccessfully, because of the government was slow to forward our request to Murgab), emboffs spoke with several border guards. At a district headquarters outside Toktashim, one officer complained of corruption that reduced his monthly fuel supply for general operations from the official 1 ton to just 50 liters. He had to buy his uniform and boots himself.

At the border guards' base at Kara Kul, two conscripts circulated among the few tourists in SUVs, asking for a ride to Murgab. They had finished their term of service, but had no transport home. In Murgab, the border guard regional commander told us by telephone he would meet with us, but then left. His deputies would not speak with us, as they had no orders to do so.

BUSTED FLAT IN ISHKASHIM, WAITING FOR A PLANE

¶12. (SBU) Emboffs passed through Ishkashim, a small pleasant town on the Afghan border at the western end of the Wakhan corridor. The Mayor, Amrihudo Hakdod, wants a free trade zone in town. It would specialize in processing local food

products and trucking or flying them around the region. Ishkashim was close to several large central Asian cities by air. A local hydropower plant would supply power for the new industries. The government supported a Free Economic Zone in Ishkashim, and the President visited during his July visit to GBAO. At the silent Ishkashim airfield, a few men painted

and plastered what looked to be a bus stop, in fact the terminal building. A worker with wet plaster covering his hands introduced himself as the airport director, and said that Tajik Air, after some years hiatus, now served Ishkashim once or twice a week via Khorog, and was paying to upgrade the "terminal." Daler Juraev later told us there was no such air service, and AKDN paid for the terminal repainting in preparation for the visit of the Aga Khan in late-October. On the edge of town lay the Free Economic Zone site - an empty field without water, electricity, or even a sign.

¶13. (SBU) Ishkashim's Saturday Afghan border market was in full swing. In a fenced-in no-man's-land on the Afghan side of the river a couple hundred Afghans and Tajiks milled about, eyeing each other's junk; plastic shoes, cheap clothes, dubious medicines, and sacks of potatoes and onions. A few European adventure-chic tourists mixed with the crowd. Their SUVs, parked on the Tajik side, were emblazoned with expedition logos and maps showing their drives around Asia.

THE MAYOR AT THE END OF THE WORLD

¶14. (SBU) The Mayor of Murgab, Maizambek Tuichiev, sat in his freezing cold office in the town center. He summed up the economic situation in Murgab as "bad", but with glimmers of hope. Microfinance loans increasingly were used to start small businesses, mainly in livestock. Wool processing and brick making could be growth areas. Mining interests from Kazakhstan and China were coming into the area. Tajik Air had transferred the airfield to local government ownership, perhaps tourists would fly directly to Murgab. But the near total lack of electricity retarded development. The dim red glow of electric lights in Murgab were not enough to light a room. The power shortage fed an environmental problem that threatened the region's livestock base - locals harvested grass for fuel, and ranged many kilometers looking for grass to burn in winter. Stripping all the grass led to erosion, and reduced fodder for livestock. But without power or other fuel, as there had been under the USSR, locals had no other option.

¶15. (SBU) On reported tensions over illegal land transfers the Government made to China along their border near Murgab that sparked a demonstration in Khorog in early 2008, the Mayor said some "old people" did not understand the issue and got upset, but they had since changed their attitudes. In the middle of the meeting he received a telephone call. "Are they there?" we overheard. "Yes" he said, and hung up.

¶16. (SBU) On inspection, Murgab's market bazaar was doing slightly better than a year ago. Fruits and vegetables were for sale, and a better selection of packaged foods. The town also looked better. Many houses were newly painted. While mobile telephone service was limited to a sole company, a second provider was about to begin service. A visit to a local school found many children eager to learn English, and able to converse in limited fashion. But Murgab was still seemed empty and dilapidated. At the airfield, previously used by Russian border guards, the terminal building was a ruined shell, with bits of its debris scattered across the tarmac. The departing Russian border guards ripped out anything they could use or sell; window frames, wall tiles, plumbing.

REGION VERSUS CENTER? NOT SO MUCH

¶17. (C) Buribek Buribekov, a Khorog journalist, described the problems of the region as low salaries, high prices, and electricity debts. He, Juraev, and Dilovar Butabekov, Campus Head of the AKDN-supported University of Central Asia (UCA), played down the recent demonstrations against the prosecutor and the military in Khorog (Ref A). Juraev said the demonstrations were organized by four local "warlords" - narcotics smugglers, who got family and neighbors from their villages to attend the demonstration that was really against increased government pressure on their activities. All three

of them said the President's July visit to GBAO had reduced tensions there, and helped win support for the central government.

¶18. (SBU) Gulhasan Mirhasan, Executive Director of the Ismaili Tariqa Relief and Educational Council, noted the many people leaving for Russia, and the loss of local teachers because of low salaries. He dismissed the economic impact of the President's recent visit as insignificant. He and Diloar Butabekov complained of rising heroin use among locals. As for religious differences between Ismailis and Sunnis, he thought this had little potential to spark tensions, since the populations lived in different areas of Tajikistan.

¶19. (C) While all our contacts dismissed regional alienation from Dushanbe as a non-issue, there were hints of Dushanbe's mistrust of GBAO. Butabekov discussed the need to keep central government officials involved in development projects, so that they felt they had helped plan them; but he dismissed their contributions, describing the process as one of "opening their eyes." He described the AKDN's role as setting a new standard in education and in development priorities, mainly through more liberal economic and political views. Butabekov thought the regional separatism of the 1990s was completely dead, dismissing it as a fad associated with the breakup of the USSR. Buribekov talked about a rumored draft agreement between the GBAO administration and the central government defining the regional government's revenue share from mining investors. According to him, the document had sat in parliament for years, as the government did not want to allow GBAO real Qyears, as the government did not want to allow GBAO real autonomy or to develop economically.

¶20. (SBU) Back in Dushanbe, Minister of Economic Development Bobozoda reacted testily when asked about the role of the AKDN in GBAO. He was tired of the Aga Khan getting credit for so much that was actually done by the Government of Tajikistan. He skipped the inconvenient fact that much of "the Government's" assistance to GBAO is funded by AKDN.

COMMENT: BIG MOUNTAINS, SMALL HORIZONS

¶21. (C) The government of Tajikistan is suspicious of all foreign involvement in the country, whether in economic, political, or educational matters. This reflects the leadership's sense of Tajikistan's weight in relation to surrounding powers, and the weakness of their own position within Tajikistan. GBAO will always be viewed in this suspicious light, because of the short-lived separatist movement there during the civil war, and the region's

religious ties to a wealthy and ill-understood outside power who supports modernization, liberalism, and western-style education. The claims by the Economic Development Minister and the Ishkashim airport director that AKDN support was really GOTI support, and UCA's need to involve Dushanbe officials in educational reform illustrate the Government's insecurity and need to claim credit for the efforts of others.

¶22. (C) Comment Continued: AKDN's activities in GBAO and elsewhere may help drag Tajikistan into the twenty-first century by the force of their example. For the people of GBAO, lacking natural resources, physically isolated, and politically neglected, AKDN is a lifeline they can use to pull themselves to a basic economic future. Electricity is key to developing tourist services and mining, and Pamir Energy is in capable hands with a vision to expand. Regional trade is unlikely to contribute much to GBAO's economy, because of the region's paucity of products and consumers. Such trade as there is could decline in the next few years as road improvement projects through northern Tajikistan open up new and much shorter routes from Western China to Tajikistan and on to Afghanistan, bypassing GBAO. Deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan would also cut off GBAO from another useful, albeit limited, direction for international trade and

cooperation. End Comment.

¶23. (SBU) Exhausted, sunburned, and happy, our journey ended at the five-star Serena hotel in Khorog, with hot water in large bathtubs, excellent food, a beer in the minibar, and Afghanistan sitting pretty across the river. While the region's economic prospects seem limited, the trip was defined by the deep blue sky at noon at Murgab, the amazing stars, the Andromeda galaxy visible to the naked eye, long haired Yaks nibbling their way across the valley floors, horses walking up the pass north of Kara Kul, and the wind driving clouds of dust down the Wakhan Corridor, with the Pakistani Hindu Kush towering above like thunderheads. The people and politics of Badakhshan are fascinating in their varied mundane and fantastic aspects; but compared to the place itself, they seem like an afterthought.
JACOBSON